

Petronius' Trimalchio: the beast at the feast

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Dining and death were closely connected in the Roman world: we find scenes of drinking in funerary art and images of skeletons on the floors of dining rooms. One of the most striking examples of this connection, though, comes from a text, Petronius' *Satyrica*, and a dinner-party episode which inspired *The Great Gatsby*. Here Ian Repath shows us some of the ways in which death pervades Petronius' dinner and what this obsession with the Underworld does to the host of the dinner, Trimalchio.

'I want you to think you've been invited to my wake.' The thing was becoming absolutely sickening, when Trimalchio, showing the effects of his disgusting drunkenness, had a fresh entertainment brought into the dining-room, some cornet players. Propped up on a lot of cushions, he stretched out along the edge of the couch and said: 'Pretend I'm dead and say something nice.'
(Petronius *Satyrica* 78, translated by Sullivan)

The *Satyrica* by Petronius is a text about which we know far less than we would like. The identity of its author, its date of composition, who read it, and even what kind of text it is are questions which are likely never to receive definite answers. The commonest opinion is that it was written by the Petronius who was a courtier of the Roman emperor Nero, in the 60s A.D. Part of the problem is that it survives only in fragments, varying from short snippets to extended episodes, which include and suggest a dizzying mix of sex, magic, murder, robbery, deception, and pretentiousness. These add up to a lengthy work (a novel?) about fictional characters and their adventures and one which is as witty and allusive as it can be crude. The broad and deep knowledge of Greek and Latin literature demanded of its reader suggests that it was written for the entertainment of the educated elite.

The best-preserved and most famous episode is the dinner of Trimalchio (chapters 27–79), to whose house the narrator Encolpius and his companions are invited. Trimalchio is both fascinating and repulsive, and reveals some of the complexities at work in this text. There are plenty of things one could say about the way in

which his character is constructed, including the possibilities that he embodies the elite's opinion of rich ex-slaves or/and that he is a satirical reflection of the emperor Nero. Here, however, I wish to consider one facet only (Trimalchio as a metaphorical monster or beast) and to demonstrate how this identification helps our digestion of the text. First, however, I offer a passage which already encourages the reader to think carefully about *what* they are consuming.

When is a boar not a bore?

Trimalchio's dinner guests are mostly other freedmen, and he tries to assert his pre-eminence, through the ostentatious display of wealth and seemingly endless courses of food and drink. Many of these courses are puzzling or deceptive in appearance, and the question of trying to understand the significance of what is going on is emphasized in the following example in particular. Encolpius says:

Behind them came a great dish and on it lay a wild boar of the largest possible size, and, what is more, wearing a freedman's cap on its head. ...

... I kept quiet, turning over a lot of ideas as to why the boar had come in with a freedman's cap on it. After working through all sorts of wild fancies, I ventured to put to my experienced neighbour the question I was racking my brains with. He of course replied:

'Even the man waiting on you could explain this obvious point – it's not

puzzling at all, it's quite simple. The boar here was pressed into service for the last course yesterday, but the guests let it go. So today it returns to the feast as a freedman.' (40–41)

The answer then is simple: the boar is nothing more than a silly joke. Or is it? Is Encolpius sensible to be satisfied by this answer? Should he/we be more worldly?

The boar may have been 'freed' by the previous day's guests, but it will not be free for long, since it is destined to be eaten. This might encourage us to ask Encolpius' question again and to be alive to different possibilities of what this 'freedman' boar might signify. By putting this scene into context and pursuing my monster theme, its implications will become quite sinister by the time we get to the end of the episode.

Under-worldly wise

Part one of my contextualization is bound up with one of the central concerns of the dinner-party episode: mortality and death. The freedmen talk about funerals, Trimalchio recites a poem about the brevity of life, and he even says that an astrologer has told him when he is going to die. This obsession reaches its climax towards the end of the episode, when, as seen in the quotation at the beginning of this piece, Trimalchio orchestrates a rehearsal of his own funeral, but it is reinforced throughout, framed even, by allusions to the mythological Underworld. Towards the beginning of the episode, Encolpius says that when he entered Trimalchio's house:

'... I almost fell over backwards and broke a leg. There, on the left as one entered, not far from the porter's cubbyhole, was a huge dog with a chain round its neck. It was painted on the wall and over it, in big capitals, was written: BEWARE OF THE DOG. My colleagues laughed at me, ...' (29)

Encolpius likes to think of himself as a kind of epic hero, and while he clearly is not (what tried and tested hero would be frightened by a painting?!), his pretensions encourage us to see the mural as an

allusion to the monstrous dog that guards the Underworld, perhaps best known to us and to a Roman reader from book 6 of Virgil's *Aeneid*. Towards the end of the Trimalchio episode (72), when Encolpius and his friends Ascyltus and Giton try to leave, this impression is reinforced as they are barked at by a real dog and fall into a fishpond. When Giton distracts the dog with food, we are reminded even more obviously of Aeneas gaining entry into the Underworld – privileged access which makes Encolpius' failure to get out scream more loudly. In this way, Trimalchio's domain can be seen as an inescapable hell with Trimalchio, its host and leader, as Pluto, the king of the dead.

Lost in the labyrinth

Immediately after this failed escape, Encolpius calls Trimalchio's house a 'modern labyrinth' (73) – and this is part of the second major network of ideas and allusions I wish to highlight. A little earlier, Trimalchio had said this about his chef:

'There couldn't be a more valuable man to have. Say the word and he'll produce a fish out of a sow's belly, a pigeon out of the lard, a turtle dove out of the ham, and fowl out of the knuckle. So he's been given a nice name I thought of myself – he's called Daedalus.' (70)

Daedalus was the name of the legendary craftsman and inventor who created the labyrinth at Knossos on Crete to house the part man, part bull that was the Minotaur. Trimalchio's Daedalus, though, is metaphorically trapped in this new labyrinth, serving the whims of his master. We see a similar evocation and twisting of this myth, when the main characters finally do escape:

'There was no torch available to show us the way, and as it was halfway through the night, the silence gave us little hope of meeting anyone with a light. Add to this too much wine and our ignorance of the place, which would have been a problem even in daylight. So after we had dragged our bleeding feet over all the sharp stones and jutting pieces of broken crockery for nearly a full hour, we were rescued by Giton's ingenuity. Afraid of losing his way even in daytime, the lad had shrewdly marked all the pillars and posts with chalk, and the bright marks, gleaming through even the thickest darkness, showed us the way'. (79)

Giton's ingenuity echoes the way in which the King of Crete's daughter, Ariadne, used thread to help Theseus escape the labyrinth after he had killed the Minotaur.

If Giton is a new Ariadne, and Encolpius is a new Theseus, then it follows that Trimalchio, in his a-mazing home, must be a new Minotaur. Yet he is not killed, left instead to continue his sub-human existence and to perpetuate his own cycle of feasting. The Minotaur feasted on young men and women, and, while Trimalchio is not literally a cannibal, his offering of wild boar now tastes different. For what are he and his fellow freedmen doing eating a wild boar in a freedman's cap, if not cannibalizing themselves? As the new Minotaur, Trimalchio is leading by example.

And the moral of the story?

It should be said in conclusion that Trimalchio is not an entirely unsympathetic character: he wants to be accepted, loved, and remembered; but he is trapped by his newly won wealth and by his desire to out-perform his peers, trapping himself in his own hellish labyrinth. He is both Pluto, king of the dead, and Minotaur, a monstrous metaphorical cannibal. What, then, are we to make of him? Who is he? Why did Petronius create such a character? These are not easy questions to answer, because the text itself is a perplexing labyrinth, and its fragmentary state only exacerbates this. However, if one considers themes such as social status, food, wealth, and display, Petronius' larger-than-life host can be seen as a character of universal significance, a symbol of greed, ostentation, over-consumption, ignorance, obnoxious behaviour, and self-obsession. When one adds his melancholy, his distortion of myth, and the hints of cannibalism, Trimalchio can be seen to stand for an unproductive and moribund life – a virtual death no less which threatens to trap others and deprive them of their vitality. Such a character is as fitting and resonant for our own time as for any other.

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